

COUNCIL WORK SESSION JULY 26, 2016

The work session of the Council of the Town of Altavista was held in the Council Chambers of the J.R. Burgess Municipal Building, 510 Seventh Street, on July 26, 2016 at 5:00 p.m.

Council members
present:

Mayor Michael Mattox
Mrs. Micki Brumfield
Mrs. Beverley Dalton
Mr. Charles Edwards
Mr. Tracy Emerson
Mr. Timothy George
Mr. Jay Higginbotham

Mr. Higginbotham arrived at 5:08 p.m.

Also present:
Manager

Mr. J. Waverly Coggsdale, III, Town
Mr. Daniel Witt, Assistant Town Manager
Mrs. Tobie Shelton, Finance Director
Mr. Dennis Jarvis, Economic Dev. Director
Mr. David Garrett, Public Works Director
Mrs. Mary Hall, Administration

1. Mayor Mattox called the meeting to order and presided.
2. Mayor Mattox advised the Public Comment for items not on the agenda would be addressed first on the agenda and asked if there were any additional changes to the agenda.

A motion was made by Mrs. Dalton, seconded by Mr. George, to approve the agenda as amended.

Motion carried:

VOTE:	Mr. Michael Mattox	Yes
	Mrs. Micki Brumfield	No
	Mrs. Beverley Dalton	Yes
	Mr. Charles Edwards	Yes
	Mr. Tracy Emerson	Yes
	Mr. Timothy George	Yes
	Mr. Jay Higginbotham	Yes

3. Public Comments

Mayor Mattox asked if anyone would like to speak on anything not listed on the agenda.

No one came forward.

4. Introductions and Special Presentations

- a. Housing Study Presentation-Virginia Tech

Mr. Jarvis addressed Council and advised last year staff presented to Council the recommendation of a housing study. He noted he met with Mr. John Provo, Director of Economic Development at Virginia Tech, to talk about a housing study and a proposal was presented. From the John Martin event in March, there is an understanding from community leaders in regards to changes for the community and specific initiatives they would like to see, creating awareness about housing and creating awareness of the current housing. Mr. Jarvis

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stated he contacted Ms. Sarah Lyon-Hill and Ms. Mel Jones about addressing the study in depth.

Ms. Sarah Lyon-Hill, an Economic Development specialist, addressed Council stating they were approached in regards to what the possibilities are to grow the population and how to improve the housing and economic development in the town of Altavista. She noted a proposal has been written stepping out what they would do over a 7 or 8-month period. She presented Council with a synopsis of the proposal noting this proposal will entail a lot of support and interaction between Council and the community to get an ideal of what the goals and priorities are and what kind of implementation actions can be taken based off the data driven research. She advised they would start on the housing piece and obtain a housing analysis, understand what is going on, understand key demographics that could be targeted and what other amenities are wanted in the town. They would conduct stakeholder discussions for local input. Ms. Hill noted the proposal was written about a year ago; today the purpose is to engage Council in a discussion so they can understand the needs of the town, of the region in general and how to attract different groups to Altavista and grow that population.

Ms. Mel Jones, Research Associate at Virginia Tech with the Center for Housing Research, addressed Council advising they have a dual mandate of doing research for localities across Virginia as well as across the nation. She noted they conduct many types of housing studies and explained the different types.

Mayor Mattox asked what are some of the communities they have worked with.

Ms. Jones advised Virginia Beach, James City County, Fairfax County and are currently working with the entire state of Virginia (the study consists of how housing relates to economic development), and the Richmond PDC area. For the town of Altavista they would look at the county along with Lynchburg MSA to see where the town fits into that dynamic. Ms. Jones asked when was most of the housing in the town built, have the housing units been taken care of, is housing stock changing or not changing.

Mayor Mattox stated other than the work of Habitat for Humanity, only one or two houses have been built in town in the last ten years.

Mr. Mitch Bernard, town resident, asked if there was any way the data can be referenced through property transfers and assessments.

Mr. Coggsdale advised yes.

Ms. Jones stated when they do a study especially in a town where there are not many housing units there is not a lot of publicly available Census data that is very useful. They have to look at assessment data, building permit data, nuisance data, and code enforcement data. She asked Council for their impressions of the housing market.

Mrs. Dalton stated the housing situation is not very dynamic but stagnate: what is here is here and has been for a long time. Part of the reason for wanting to look at housing is to take the data driven information and encourage some dynamic movement either through some segments of housing being renovated; sections of housing to be eradicated and built again or is there a need for rental. How can housing be used to attract the wanted demographics. Mrs. Dalton felt the town was stagnant in attracting the young and keeping the elderly.

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She asked how this stagnate situation could be driven to attract the wanted demographic.

Ms. Jones stated housing and economic development are very connected. Because even if there is an easily commutable area there is no reason to pass the community often through a labor intensive process or a particular company to build the housing that they would like to see. They are connected. She suggested not getting carried away with the “build it and they will come” idea but there are ways of thinking about housing absorption and doing it in a way that will attract the types of people that Council would like to attract. Ms. Jones stated the word “stale” is often used for housing that hasn’t been updated or has the characteristics that people are looking for now. Even if a house has been cared for it may not be what the market is demanding at this point.

Mr. George added although we are always searching, trying to create new jobs, there are great jobs here. It would be nice if the people that work these jobs would live here; typically, with the better paying jobs people don’t. They live in Lynchburg or just outside of Lynchburg. Mr. George stated it would be nice to have this looked into.

Ms. Jones stated they could look at wages that people are earning in local companies and see if the housing here would meet their needs or if they are commuting out for amenities they don’t feel like they have access to here. She noted another important economic development issue is when people are earning wages here, they take it home and spend the majority of it there.

Mrs. Brumfield stated she has done some research and the median income is \$31,000, the jobs that are coming here are a little more than that which is not a substantial amount of money to buy a big house, town house or condo. Out of the 3,400 people that live here about 543 work here the rest go somewhere else; drive outside of town because we don’t have the jobs here. Mrs. Brumfield felt if there were jobs here it would take care of the housing problems and everything else around here. There has to be employment here for people to buy the houses.

Ms. Jones stated affordable housing is a huge issue throughout the state, a big challenge for families.

Mr. Edwards advised he spoke to two local realtors. He gained the impression that we may be short in two types of housing; housing for the first time buyers (If the houses were built, who would live in them. Without jobs who could afford the housing.) and housing for the older folks who would like to live in an area where the maintenance is taken care of. He wasn’t sure if a developer would be interested in this type of thing but felt there may be a demand. He felt there was very little the Town could do that would change the picture; there wasn’t the money or the mandate to go out and start building houses. He noted another problem for the town was the lack of developable land; the one large track of land is priced for industrial standards. Mr. Edwards stated he didn’t know how Council could influence this situation.

Ms. Jones stated Council does have quite a bit of power noting it is surprising how just creating a plan can attract developers; a plan takes the guesswork out of what the developer is doing. The guesswork is where developers take a lot of risk. There are low cost things Council can do to encourage people to take steps with their housing.

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Mrs. Dalton asked if the difference from where the town is now and what might happen with the results of the study is that we move from anecdote information to data driven information that takes some of the risk out from developers and/or Council. One reason for being hesitant to move along is being a small town and there aren't a lot of ways to move; therefore, stagnant. Council doesn't know where the biggest risk is or the biggest opportunities are. Mrs. Dalton stated her way of thinking about the study is that Council can move from anecdotal information to data driven information and can confirm some assumptions.

Ms. Jones responded that all of their work is data driven: most will be qualitative data; some will be quantitative. The qualitative data can go a long way towards answering if this is true or not. They like to talk to the experts; to realtors, builders, folks that work in the planning department because data is not always right. She will look at the data and it is very important come back and ask Council if it looks right to them. They want to validate the data so it makes sense.

Mr. Bernard commented data will be very helpful to let us know where we stand, where the gaps are, how we compare with others but we also need a plan. He asked Ms. Jones if she could direct us to where plans are obvious which he doubted. He wondered if she could provide situations or suggestions as far as legal issues and incentives. He thought incentives may need to be present for a developer. He mentioned Runk and Platt has purchased land in Hurt, Virginia, and suggested something could be learned from that.

Mr. Emerson stated there is a lot going on in the city of Lynchburg and they are busting at the seams pushing businesses out into Campbell County. He asked what could Council do to attract those folks not wanting to live in the city to come to Altavista. Mr. Emerson stated one big thing for him is quality of life; what brings people out of the city to a town. What can be offered to them other than a great place to life. He felt the town was in a unique position with Lynchburg and Liberty University growing.

Ms. Jones stated Altavista is a small town and they will have to work with Council and the data and conduct analysis to understand what is going on with the housing. With Lynchburg they can work with the census data and see if there are gaps that the town of Altavista can potentially fill noting there are all kinds of questions that can be answered with this public data. It should be easy to figure out the housing demands in the Lynchburg area and where Altavista might fit into that.

Mr. Edwards asked if we found a way to bring 300 or 400 people into Altavista and house them, how would that benefit the town.

Ms. Jones replied the most direct way would be in tax revenues. If you are thinking of increasing the population, you may be introducing more young people to down town businesses having more support, capturing some of the people who commute into Altavista for work you are creating a fair amount of potential for economic development. Attracting young people and active seniors down town could create a more vibrant town.

Mr. Edwards asked Ms. Jones could she support the argument that the average house will pay its own way in terms of taxes and services.

Ms. Jones stated without knowing much about the Town's tax system she couldn't answer that question.

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Mr. Edwards stated the industries and commercial segment of the town carry a large portion of the load.

Ms. Jones responded that you have to think about the connection of housing and the businesses that those residents support; it is all connected.

Mrs. Dalton noted another factor is the dynamic of workforce, there is a commuting population coming and going.

Ms. Betty Gilliam, town resident, advised she moved back to Altavista a year ago and she is on a limited budget. When she compared renting to purchasing a home, she would be paying more in rent than an inexpensive house with a mortgage. She mentioned it was an older home that had to have a lot of renovations. Ms. Gilliam stated it was her observation there are a lot of older houses for sale. She referred to the 2010 Census stating 17% of the population was over 65 and felt this has increased. A lot of the people over 65 don't want the big homes, don't want to maintain them. She asked what should be done with the inventory of houses that the town already has. Ms. Gilliam did not feel the young people would want these older houses.

Mayor Mattox stated we all want to keep the wealth in Altavista; Altavista has a large manufacturing base with over 2,000 jobs and our own economic development department which is unheard of for a town this size. If 80% of these people are going home and shopping in their neighborhood this means this money is leaving the town. Mayor Mattox is hoping the data will show what the town is lacking; what are we missing, what should we aggressively pursue.

Mr. Bernard presented two difference scenarios; as an older fella living in one of the homes in town. When I need something I am going to Wal-Mart then I am going home. As a younger fella, I don't find things suitable to my needs or activities so I commute to Lynchburg.

Mayor Mattox felt Council had to reach a critical mass of housing and services that will attract the demographics that are wanted. There are things popping up in Altavista. He referred to a lady in attendance that left Lynchburg to come to Altavista. He felt it was important to realize that the future of Altavista is our youth and keeping a sustainable community with new people moving in or keeping the children thinking it is a wonderful place and won't move anywhere else.

Ms. Jones noted millennials are a huge generation and they are changing what they use to think; millennials use to look at big city areas but now have more than walkable assess in their demand profile. Part of what they like is privacy, being close to nature; 40% prefer a rural setting. She stated the town does not have to look different to attract millennials, but they do have to be able to locate a house here, afford to live here and have reasonable access to a job. She noted the housing market is sticky; houses don't go up over night or in mass. The majority of the housing is older housing; over 60% of the housing in Virginia Beach is older housing. Housing being sticky means the housing is inappropriate. She added there are strategies.

Mrs. Dalton stated there are persons in the community who are interested in investing and modifying existing housing on their own dime. If that interest was informed by data, it is reasonable to think it will encourage that interest to go in the proper directions. Mrs. Dalton stated she is interested in finding out from the data what are the needs, where does the data take us to invest. This community could

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on the margins drive the resources to the demographics that are wanted.

Ms. Ashley Holloway stated as a young professional that is moving to Altavista there has to be something to do here. She referred to the theater that isn't being used. She stated she does want something to do when she gets off from work; she doesn't want to go to a bar but she does love the theater. She did not feel things need to change it just needs to be made more robust and make it known. She stated she had no idea there was a natural food store in the Town. She stated it needs to be known what is available in the town.

Mrs. Laney Thompson, Realtor and town resident, noted there are houses on the market in the town with several being under contract. She stated the ones that she is working with are for people that are relocating to the Town that have stumbled onto Altavista. They like the quality of the town. Not all are retired. She noted there has been some trickle down from Liberty University over the past two to three years. Some state housing has been shown by some Lynchburg realtors who show a house in a great neighborhood with great amenities.

Ms. Jones asked what are the housing priorities and goals? Are there certain gaps in housing? What is your vision for the town over all?

Mrs. Brumfield stated at one time this was flourishing little town and everyone was busy; dentist and doctor offices. She stated when the average salary is \$31,000, houses are not going to be remodeled. People are not going to put money in to a house when they don't have the income. If the job is here, they will live here because women especially don't want to drive an hour to work and then an hour home. She felt the whole thing would be solved when the people coming in here have jobs. The house is secondary.

Ms. Jones stated there are people that would think about commuting to Lynchburg and there are people that work in the town but can't or don't want to live here. She stated there are probably people that are extremely low income here who cannot maintain their house and there are people that are paid well above the median that have wants and needs. There are different salary ranges and needs; understanding that range and the needs is realistic.

Mrs. Brumfield stated she has noticed the people retiring have left the area to go live where their children are. May be if there was some where for them to go maybe they would not have left the area.

Mr. George stated we always want to pursue more jobs but in the meantime there is a lot that can be done to attract people. He stated he is all about creating an environment that the younger people would enjoy; biking trails, hiking trails, canoe ramp, perhaps a splash park. There are values in living in a small town; local schools, restaurants that you can walk to. He felt anything Council could do to offer more amenities is a positive for future growth. Mr. George stated Altavista has for a while be aging out and the youth are growing up and moving elsewhere.

Mr. Higginbotham stated the center of gravity has moved with Wal-Mart. If there were more jobs in town it might revitalize downtown. Everyone wants a vibrant downtown where people can come and enjoy. He stated he was not sure what the study will do for Council; in the scope they stated with small communities they may not always get it right and have to do more studies.

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Ms. Jones stated they had no intentions of sending Council down an endless path and that is the reason talking to them was really good; she could produce a housing study but that may not be the one needed for the town.

Mr. Higginbotham stated normally a developer will do his own housing study; and if an analysis is done now six months from now it may be obsolete. Mr. Higginbotham stated another concern of his is the Town of Altavista is being compared to Virginia Beach, Fairfax or the entire state of Virginia. He asked Ms. Jones if they have done anything on small towns.

Ms. Jones said they have been allowed to do them; there isn't very good data in small towns. It takes a lot of updating through more town data, talking to expert realtors, developers and builders in the area. This takes more effort on their part.

Mrs. Tanya Overbey commented that there are a lot of people that work in town that would live here if there was appropriate housing available. She is familiar with the teaching population in the community and these people are choosing to live outside of town because they want the new homes with the granite counter tops and stainless appliances and they don't know how to do the home renovations or can't afford to have someone to do so. She did not feel this was about creating new jobs to bring people, there are a lot of people working here that would live here if there was the appropriate home.

Mrs. Laney Thompson noted one of the biggest problems in the town of Altavista is land.

Ms. Jones stated when there is a restriction on land you have to look at redevelopment or infill.

Mrs. Dalton stated or a boundary line adjustment.

Ms. Jones referred to the James City County study stating it was a housing conditions study; this is a recent indebt study with similarities to Altavista. In this study they looked at every single house and mobile home in the county that was worth less than \$400,000 and built before 2000 to try and ascertain where their marketing was softening, which homes needed to be redeveloped or invested in and how the county could go about that development or encouraging neighborhoods to reinvest or investing themselves through their public funds and policies to encourage more affordable funds.

Mr. Emerson asked if there are any incentives and suggested this may be something to look at.

Ms. Jones stated there is the possibility of using people in the town with renovating expertise to teach younger people how to do renovations, have tools available for rent for renovations, financial incentives to help people, and tax abatements.

Mr. Bernard asked if developers rather than the home buyer could be offered incentives to flip homes.

Ms. Jones stated there can be revolving loans or low interest loans.

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Mr. Bernard stated he wasn't sure what was in the town's authority.

Ms. Jones stated there is different enabling legislation for towns, counties and independent cities. They would research this matter along the way.

Mr. Edwards noted the banks are not very cooperative in purchasing a home that needs renovations, they want the home to be ready to move into.

Ms. Jones stated there are mortgage incentives for home buyers to renovate homes; probably not a locate bank that they would work with. She noted one thing that can help a community is to have a home buyer counselor to help home buyers to find access to these programs.

Mayor Mattox noted there is a redeveloper who is working with two of the local banks and is going one house at a time to flip them.

Mayor Mattox advised Council had a vision some years ago and it was so important to them that they put it on the strategic plan and it has been a priority of Council. He referred to the John Martin event held in town noting he flipped Richmond. He gave an analogy of the new economic model; he said if new jobs were brought in, the town would be successful. Mayor Mattox stated in the past 15 years only one new industry has come to Region 2000. Mr. Martin now says you build a high quality place; quality of living, quality of life and it attracts the innovative creative class. They build the town up. He asked how important it is to have good housing and properly matched housing for new jobs coming to town.

Ms. Jones stated they are starting to understand how housing and economic development are related. Housing and transportation together are a limiting factor for jobs. If you can't live there or get there, then you can't work there. People prefer to lower their cost and time is one of their cost. If they can find what they need, it is a tradeoff. If what you need in order to be happy or to support your family is further away, you may be willing to pay it. Where they live and where they work are fundamentally related. Without appropriate housing or enough housing, the economic potential is limited. An employer would like housing for everyone employed within a certain radius and if you don't have it then they won't come. If employees have to commute from far away, often employers have to compensate those employees with better hours, better payment (reimbursement for the time and effort they are spending to get to the job). Employers would like to see their employees have access to affordable housing close by. If there is a mismatch between the housing and jobs it can cause congestion, a lot of wages are leaking to home communities. If there is the work then bedroom community environment, there is a breakdown of the community so people have a harder time enjoying the community and people aren't looking for that anymore. Ms. Jones stated when you have people in your community who are struggling to find affordable housing, they are suffering because they can't afford the necessities that they need. When there are enough people in this situation it becomes a community problem.

Ms. Hill added to Ms. Jones' comments that on the economic development end it reduces your ability to bring in new industries and companies and also leads to a very high employee turnover. You want your employees close to your industry and working long term.

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Mrs. Brumfield stated she struggles to understand how Council has any control over where things are built, what is updated, what is not updated, this is all up to the individual home owners. If there is nowhere to build in the town are you going to come back and tell Council, you have to build outside in the county which is still up to the developers. She stated Council supports economic development and want to provide Mr. Jarvis with tools for such.

Ms. Jones stated Council does not have control but can create a clear path that shows people where you want to go, where it makes sense to go, and where it would be easiest for them to go. There can be financial incentives; tax abatements, free land, help get the owners together. She noted there are many strategies that Council can implement in order to pave this path.

Mrs. Dalton stated one thing Council has control over is whether or not to do the housing study; noting this would be statistic information that would be helpful to the developer. She noted in the downtown area, in granting opportunities, there are some second story living opportunities. She stated Council can be a part of the puzzle in incentivizing the opportunities.

Ms. Emelyn Gwynn, Town of Altavista Main Street Coordinator, noted there is approximately 13 to 19 units and they are presently doing a housing study on a large building on Broad Street.

Mr. Edwards stated according to his calculations Altavista's population has dropped 37% in the last 15 years.

Mayor Mattox stated one thing needed is the data so we can show there is a need; Council is not just looking for jobs but better housing and quality of life.

Ms. Hill added as a second part of this, they were going to look at integrating a downtown analysis with the housing analysis.

Mayor Mattox stated if it is going to fill up the store fronts.

Mr. George asked if they were non-profit.

Ms. Hill stated they are not, they work for Virginia Tech.

Mr. John Jordan, Planning Commission Chair, stated it appears Council is somewhat divided on this project; he asked that if this study is approved that it be specific. He noted the best information came from this meeting today.

Mrs. Overbey advised she chairs a Chamber of Commerce committee that came out of the John Martin meeting, "Attract People Committee". One of the things that has been discussed amongst this committee and is to be presented to Council at a future meeting is to encourage Council to seek a developer to address the housing issues.

Mayor Mattox asked if they were comfortable with the action plan if Council decides to go down this path.

Ms. Hill stated she hates plans that go into drawers, they try to make an action plan as specific as possible.

Ms. Jones stated generally they do a variety depending on what is wanted. She referred to Mrs. Overbey's comments stating the idea of attracting developers is a common idea. One of the strategies can be

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to find some housing that you like in another community, find out who the developer is and follow up with them. She noted they generally do not contact general focus groups unless it is requested by the locality. They gain information from targeted focus groups.

This item to be addressed at the August Town Council meeting.

5. Items for Discussion

a. Departmental Transfers

Mr. Coggsdale advised each year, staff provides to Council information related to any departmental transfers associated with the budget. These transfers assist with overages in departmental budgets and minimizes any variances in the budget, which assists during the audit process.

It was the consensus of Council to move this item to the consensus agenda.

Mr. Higginbotham stated he would like to address going forward with the berm. He asked Mr. Garrett how much work E.C. Pace has to do.

Mr. Garrett responded approximately 60 days.

Mr. Higginbotham asked how much dirt do they have left to dig?

Mr. Garrett responded about a block.

Mr. Higginbotham asked when would there be a discussion on the berm.

Mayor Mattox stated months ago it was the decision of the majority of Council not to do anything at this time and there has been nothing to come before Council to change that decision. Once requests are made from the ones conducting research, Council will evaluate.

Mr. Coggsdale advised some test results should come from Dr. Sowers in August.

6. Public Comments

Mayor Mattox asked if anyone would like to speak on anything not listed on the agenda. No one came forward.

Mr. George asked if there was any information back from the garden areas along the exit/entrance ramps.

Mr. Coggsdale advised this is still being looked into.

Mr. Emerson advised the Altavista Band Boosters are interested in placing blue ribbons on the light posts in town to honor the Police Department.

Mrs. Dalton suggested the Altavista Band Boosters contact the town manager with some detail and he can then present to Council.

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7. Adjournment

Mayor Mattox adjourned the meeting at 6:47 p.m.

Michael E. Mattox, Mayor

J. Waverly Coggsdale, III, Clerk